'Switchers' and 'windows' save time, headaches

There are two kinds of time-saving PC programs — switchers and windows — that are particularly helpful if you jump back and forth between various application programs during the day.

Suppose you usually use three programs on your IBM PC or PC-compatible computer: a word processing program (for general correspondence and memos), a database program (for your client records), and a spreadsheet program (for budgeting and planning).

If you are working with one program and need information from another, it's typically necessary to save your current file, exit the program, load the second program, and call up the file with the information. Then, after you find what you are looking for, you need to save the file if any changes were made, exit the second program, load the first program again, call up the original file — and try to remember where you were!

To make matters worse, if the reason for the chase is to copy information exactly from one file to the other, you have to hand-copy it and then retype it after you switch back to the original program.

There is a better way

Happily, two programs can come to your rescue:

✔ "Switcher" programs allow you to load more than one application program into the computer's memory and quickly switch between them without loading and unloading.

✔ "Windowing" programs allow more than one application program to run *simultaneously* on your computer, each displayed in a different area on your computer screen.

In both cases, these programs allow you to move data between separate applications with relative ease. But each kind has its pros and cons, and each is suited for specific situations.

Switcher programs are easier to set up and simpler to use. If you set up one when you turn

on your computer in the morning, all day long you'll be able to jump instantly between your programs at the touch of a key. The operation of the first program is simply suspended until you return to it. When you do, the cursor is in the exact spot you left it — all ready for you to continue.

Practically any program that runs on your PC can be used with a switcher program. When you switch between programs, the new application program takes over the entire screen. This is one of the key differences between switcher programs and windowing programs.

With windows, you can adjust the size of the area on your screen within which each application program runs, and actually watch various applications run at the same time.

For example, if a database search normally takes your computer three minutes to complete, a windowing program permits you to work with your word processing program while the search is taking place. You do this simply by making the word processing window "active." As soon as you notice the search is complete, you can make the database window active and go back to that work.

The windowing programs are more functional and time-saving than the switcher programs, but they have significant drawbacks. They are much harder to initially install — it usually takes a consultant or an experienced technician to do it. And not all application programs will run with windowing programs. It's important to find out whether your particular applications can be supported by windowing programs before you consider using them.

Which one to choose?

If your PC use would benefit from a switcher or windowing program, here are the key products to consider:

✔ "Desk/Shift" from North American Business Systems of St. Louis, Mo. A good switcher program which includes data transfer and other memory-resident "desk tools" like an alarm clock, calender, notepad and telecommunications.

✔ "Resident" from Information Software Inc. of Dallas. A switcher program with some features not included in Desk Shift, but without as many memory-resident extras.

✔ "Topview" from IBM, available at local computer stores. The windowing program that all the competitors claim to beat. Its main defect is that it takes up too much memory.

✔ "Deskview" from Quarterdeck Office Systems of Santa Monica, Calif. A windowing program that uses less memory than Topview and has better documentation to boot.

✔ "Windows" from Microsoft, available at local computer stores. An outstanding windowing product from the company that produced the operating system for the IBM PC and compatible computers.

✔ "DoubleDOS" from SoftLogic Solutions, Manchester, N.H. A unique program that allows concurrent operation — similar to the windowing programs — but does not use windows.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Switching and windowing products are inexpensive (all under $150) and easy to use. It's important, however, to choose the best one for your specific needs. In future columns, I'll compare these products and discuss their pros and cons.

Hillel Segal is an independent computer consultant and organizer of a new association for PC users, called the Personal Computer Managers Association. He can be reached at PCMA, P.O. Box 9003, Boulder 80301.